
Health risks

For humans

Cyanobacteria can be harmful to people. If you have been in contact with water containing cyanobacteria, you may experience tingling or numbness around the fingertips and/or mouth, breathing difficulties, gastrointestinal symptoms or skin rashes. Seek medical advice from your doctor.

For pets and livestock

Pets and livestock, particularly dogs, are at risk from cyanobacteria if they swallow algal mats when swimming or drinking from rivers and lakes. Symptoms in pets and livestock include panting, lethargy, muscle tremors, twitching and convulsions. In extreme cases, poisoning can also cause death 30 minutes after symptoms first appear. Contact your veterinarian if you see these symptoms after visiting a river or lake.

If in doubt, keep them out

If you are in any doubt about the water quality, then keep your dog on a leash and away from the water. You, your doctor or your veterinarian can report potentially toxic cyanobacteria blooms to Environment Canterbury at any time by calling 0800 324 636 or going online to www.ecan.govt.nz/contact.

More information about cyanobacteria and health warnings for Canterbury's waterways can be found at www.ecan.govt.nz/health-warnings



If in doubt, keep them out

Environment Canterbury monitors popular freshwater recreation sites during summer, but warning signs notifying you of potentially toxic cyanobacteria blooms may not always be present, so it's important to know what to look out for.

What is it?

Cyanobacteria is a naturally occurring blue-green algae that has the potential to bloom, producing toxins that can harm or kill people, pets, and livestock.

What causes blooms?

Blooms form when cyanobacteria start to multiply very quickly, usually due to changes in environmental conditions such as warm temperatures, sunlight, low or stable river flows, and high levels of nutrients.

When to avoid the water

Avoid water that is cloudy, discoloured, musty smelling, or has small globules, coloured scum or thick dark brown/black mats on the bed of the river, with a slimy velvety texture.

What are the common symptoms?

Symptoms of cyanobacteria poisoning can occur within 30 minutes, including:

For people

- tingling or numbness around the fingertips and/or mouth
- breathing difficulties
- gastrointestinal symptoms
- skin rashes.

For pets and livestock:

- panting
- lethargy
- muscle tremors
- twitching
- convulsions.

What do I do if symptoms appear?

If symptoms appear after being in contact with a waterway, contact your doctor or a veterinarian immediately.

Cyanobacteria can kill, know what to look for.

What it typically looks like

In rivers

Algae mats (benthic) typically appear as dark brown/black mats attached to rocks along the riverbed and often has a strong earthy or musty smell.

High river levels may remove the algae bloom, but detached mats can accumulate along the river edge, increasing the risk of exposure



In lakes, ponds, and lagoons

Free floating algae (planktonic) are typically found if the water is cloudy, discoloured (especially blue-green colouration, or has scums or small globules suspended in it).

Not all cyanobacteria blooms are visible to the naked eye and toxins can persist after the blooms disappear.

